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## The Disciples of Saïs

(1798)

*Novalis*

Translated, introduced, and annotated by James D. Reid\*

The following is a translation of nearly half of Novalis's unfinished, two-part novel *Die Lehrlinge zu Saïs*, including the brief first part (The Disciple) in its entirety and the second (Nature) up to the beginning of the fairy tale of Hyacinth and Rose Blossom, as it appears in the first volume of the Critical Edition (Erster Band: Das dichterische Werk, 79-91).<sup>1</sup>

The manuscript has not survived. Novalis's brother Karl von Hardenberg discovered it in the possession of Novalis's second fiancé Julie von Charpentier. She gave it to him, but only on the condition that he would return the manuscript to her after making a copy, which also has been lost. The text as we have it today, based upon Karl's transcription, was first published in late 1802 in the second part of the first edition of the posthumously published *Novalis Schriften*, edited by Tieck and Schlegel.

There is some uncertainty regarding the history of its composition. The first mention of it (probably its first part only) comes in a letter to F. Schlegel dated 24 February 1798, where Novalis describes it as “a beginning under the title The Disciple of Saïs – fragments, too [the letter included the manuscript of the collection of fragments that would be published as *Pollen*] – only everything in relation to nature.”<sup>2</sup> References to the second part can be located in various contexts from May 1798 through early 1800, but by

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<sup>1</sup> Novalis, *Schriften – Historische Kritische Ausgabe* (hereafter HKA) (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960ff.), eds. R. Samuel, H.-J. Mähl, G. Schulz et al.

<sup>2</sup> HKA IV, 251.

then Novalis had set the work aside in order to complete *Heinrich von Ofterdingen/Afterdingen*, which also remained unfinished.

What can be claimed with greater confidence is that *The Disciples of Saïs* was the fruit of Novalis's intense engagement with the natural sciences as a student at the Freiberg Mining Academy, where he studied under the influence of the geologist and mineralogist Abraham Gottlob Werner and immersed himself in mathematics, physics, and biology as well. In keeping with his longstanding interest in figuring the whole, the text reveals an investment in how diverse perspectives on the natural world (including religious and aesthetic points of view) might be seen to cohere in an overarching vision of the universe. Despite the poetic form of Novalis's reflections on nature, *The Disciples* is related to the more discursive *Freiberg Natural Scientific Studies* and his ambitious notes for a Romantic encyclopedia of the sciences, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*.

The train of thought is dialogical and ends in no totalizing point of view, in line with Novalis's Kantian conviction, announced at the very start of the *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (Assorted Remarks or Miscellaneous Observations) that our search for the unconditioned is never to be satisfied: "We *seek* the unconditioned everywhere and always *find* only conditioned things."<sup>3</sup> In the end, our partiality and finitude are essential to the sorts of creatures we are, whether we are seeking unity in our political and moral lives or in our scientific endeavors to explain the natural world.

The first part of *The Disciples* is written from the first-person point of view of a single initiate, puzzling over the apparent incomprehensibility of the natural world and the promise of a teacher to reveal the mysteries of the cosmos. The disciple is unsure of himself and sees the outward path of natural inquiry as a way into himself. How to understand the relationship between mind and world is a constant in Novalis's philosophy as a whole and in his reflections on nature and the scientific knowledge of nature in particular.

The portion of the second part translated below offers a philosophical history of the philosophy and science of nature, beginning with a postulated era of pre-reflective unity of mind and world and concluding with attitudes toward nature characteristic of the modern, enlightened age, where human agency and the promise of scientific mastery of the natural world have come to dominate the intellectual scene. Along the way, Novalis weighs in on ancient (probably Greek) myth and the transition to reason in classical antiquity, pre-Socratic efforts to reduce the diversity of the phenomena to

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<sup>3</sup> HKA II, 412.

one or more basic principles, and the attitudes toward nature on the part of the various philosophers of freedom in the era of Enlightenment.

It is hazardous to saddle the text with any definitive conclusions. But the train of thought does seem to settle, at least provisionally, upon the convictions that the natural sciences call for poetic modes of reflection and expression in order to inch toward completion and that scientific, poetic, and philosophical articulations of the natural world serve the purpose of making an otherwise alien reality over in an image of home. The natural world is our habitat, and the proper study of nature, at once scientific and poetic, far from alienating us from the universe, reveals our kinship with it. Philosophy (and its scientific derivatives) is essentially homesickness, a longing to be at home everywhere in the world.

# The Disciples of Saïs<sup>1</sup>

*Novalis*

I

## The Disciple

Human beings travel along various paths. Whoever pursues and compares them will see strange figures emerge, figures that seem to belong to that great cipher script [*Chifferschrift*]<sup>2</sup> that we glimpse everywhere, in wings, eggshells, clouds, and snow, in crystals and formations of stone, on freezing waters, on the inside and outside of mountains, plants, animals, and humans, in the lights of heaven, on scored and painted discs of pitch and glass, in the iron filings around a magnet, and in strange conjunctions of chance. We divine [*ahndet*] in them the key to this miraculous writing, its grammar; but the presentiment [*Ahndung*] assumes no fixed forms and seems unwilling to

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<sup>1</sup> I depart from Manheim's translation of the title with 'disciples' rather than 'novices' for *Lehrlinge*, following the lead of G. Bianquis's French translation of the text (*Les disciples de Saïs* [Paris: Aubier, 1947]). As the word suggests, a novice is a beginner, whereas a disciple may be rather far along in an occupation or course of study. 'Student' isn't bad, and also keeps with the German (*Lehre* = teaching, *lehren* = to teach), but it doesn't convey the gravity (bordering on the religious) associated with being a *Lehrling*. 'Apprentice' could also be used, but the term does not carry the epistemic meaning that attaches to 'disciple,' which stems from the Latin *discere*, 'to learn.' Saïs is the Greek name for an ancient Egyptian city located in the western Egyptian delta. Some scholars believe that the city was an important religious center at the very beginning of Egyptian history (ca. 3100 BCE). Osiris, god of the dead, was one of several divinities worshipped there. Saïs is mentioned by several ancient Greek authors, including Herodotus, Plato, and Plutarch. According to Plutarch, the shrine of Athena/Isis in Saïs bore the inscription "I am all that has been and is and will be, and no mortal has raised my veil." The image of a veiled goddess as an emblem of nature's secrets predates Novalis by more than a century. But the idea that nature prefers to hide can be traced back at least as far as Heraclitus of Ephesus who wrote (fragment 123): Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ. According to legend, Heraclitus deposited the book that contained these words in the temple of Artemis of Ephesus, the very goddess who would eventually come to be identified or fused with the Egyptian goddess Isis. For a helpful account of the idea of nature as veiled, with some useful remarks on Novalis, see Pierre Hadot's *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, tr. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Novalis may have derived the idea of a *Chifferschrift* from the Dutch neo-Platonist Hemsterhuis. See HKA II, 267. But the term also appears in Kant's third *Critique* and, as Christian Jany usefully notes, Novalis might have been influenced by 18<sup>th</sup>-century physiology and ancient practices of divination. See *Scenographies of Perception: Sensuousness in Hegel, Novalis, Rilke, and Proust* (Legenda: Studies in Comparative Literature, 2019), p. 151, n. 7.

become a higher key. An alkahest seems to have been poured over the senses of human beings.<sup>3</sup> Their wishes, their thoughts seem to condense, if only for a moment. Thus, their presentiments emerge, but after a short while everything swims again before their eyes, just as before.

I heard it said from afar: incomprehensibility is only the consequence of incomprehension; it seeks what it has and hence can never discover more. We do not understand language, because language does not understand itself and does not want to understand itself; the genuine Sanskrit would speak in order to speak, because speaking is its joy and its essence.<sup>4</sup>

Not long after someone spoke: “Holy scripture needs no explanation.<sup>5</sup> Whoever truly speaks is full of eternal life, and his writing appears to us wonderfully allied with true mysteries, for it is a chord from the symphony of the universe.”

The voice certainly spoke of our teacher, for he understands how to gather together the characteristics that are scattered everywhere. A peculiar light is kindled in his eyes when he lays the worthy rune [*hohe Rune*] before us and peers into our eyes to see whether the stars that make the figure visible and intelligible have arisen in us, too. When he sees us grieve that night will not relent, he comforts us and promises future happiness to the diligent and faithful seer. He has often told us how as a child the drive to exercise his senses, to occupy and fulfil them, gave him no peace. He looked to the stars and traced their paths and positions in the sand. Ceaselessly he observed the ocean air and never tired of contemplating its clarity, movements, clouds, and lights. He collected stones, flowers, insects of all sorts, and laid them in rows of various kinds. He paid attention to humans and animals and sat by the seashore seeking shells. He listened carefully to his own mind and thoughts. He did not know where his longing drove him. When he was older, he roamed about, saw foreign lands and seas, new skies, strange stars,

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<sup>3</sup> An alkahest was thought by alchemists to be a universal solvent, the so-called *menstruum universale*. The term appears to have been coined by Paracelsus. The search for it dominated alchemical theory and practice throughout the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Novalis encountered the idea in his readings as a student in Freiberg, and it appears already in Fragment 57 of the *Assorted Remarks* (in the metaphorical sense as wit). In his scientific studies from the period, Novalis sees in it a power to combine all things, a “universal means of combination [*allgemeine Verbindungsmittel*]” (HKA III, 85).

<sup>4</sup> Novalis would have learned of William Jones’s research on Sanskrit through Georg Forster. As the editors of the critical edition note, “The romantics regarded Sanskrit as the original language of humanity” (HKA I, 594).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Holy scripture’ translates *heilige Schrift*. Since the speaker should not be presumed to mean the Christian Bible, this could also be translated as ‘sacred writing.’ The following fragment (#108) from the *Assorted Remarks* is consistent with a generous conception of sacred writings: “If the spirit sanctifies, every genuine book is a Bible.”

unknown plants, animals, human beings, descended into caves and saw how the earth was built in shelves and colorful layers, and pressed clay into curious rock formations. Everywhere he now discovered the familiar again, only wonderfully mixed, coupled, and thus peculiar things often ordered themselves within him. He soon began to notice combinations in everything, encounters and meetings. Soon he saw nothing by itself [*allein*] any longer. – The perceptions of his senses pressed themselves into great colorful images: he heard, saw, touched, and thought all at once. He delighted in bringing strangers together. Soon the stars were human beings and human beings were stars, stones were animals, and clouds were plants; he played with forces and appearances, he knew where and how to discover this or that, and let them appear, and plucked the strings in search of tones and phrases.

What became of him since then he does not say. He tells us that, led by him and our own pleasure, we will discover what happened to him. Several of us have left him. They have returned to their parents and studied to pursue a trade. Some he sent away, although we do not know where; he chose them. Some were only with him for a short while, others longer. One was still a child, and barely there when he handed the class over to him. He had great, dark eyes with sky-blue whites, his skin gleamed like lilies and his curls like small bright clouds when evening comes. His voice penetrated our hearts, we would gladly have given him our flowers, stones, feathers, everything. He smiled with infinite earnestness, and we felt strangely happy with him. “One day he will return,” said the teacher, “and dwell among us, then our lessons will end.” – He sent another with him, someone who often taxed us. He always looked sad, he was here for many years, nothing turned out well for him, he found it difficult when we searched for crystals or flowers. He was nearsighted and he did not know how to arrange colorful rows well. He broke everything easily. Still, nobody had such a drive for and delight in seeing and hearing. But once, – before the child entered our circle, – he suddenly grew cheerful and clever. One day he departed in sadness, he did not return and night set in. We were very troubled on his account; suddenly, as dawn arrived, we heard his voice in a nearby grove. He sang an exalted, joyful song; we were all amazed; the teacher looked eastward with a gaze the likes of which I will never see again. Soon he stepped into our midst and, with inexpressible bliss in his countenance, brought a humble little stone of strange shape. The teacher took it in hand and kissed it for a long while, then he looked at us with watery eyes and placed the little stone in an empty spot, in the middle of other stones, precisely where the many rows converged like spokes.

I will never forget these moments. It was as if we’d had a bright, fugitive presentiment of this wonderful world in our souls.

I am also clumsier than the others, and the treasures of nature seem more reluctant to let me discover them. Still, the teacher is well-disposed toward me and lets me sit in thought when the others go seeking. It has never been for me as it is for the teacher. Everything leads me back into myself. I well understood what the second voice once said. I take joy in the wonderful crowds and figures in the halls, and to me alone it is as if they were only images, garments, ornaments, gathered around a wonderful divine image, and this is always in my thoughts. I do not seek them, but in them I often seek. It is as if they should show me the way to where the maiden sits in deep sleep, the one for whom my spirit longs. The teacher has never spoken of this to me, and I can confide nothing in him, it seems to me an inviolable secret. I would have gladly questioned that child, I found kinship in his features; in his proximity everything seemed to grow inwardly brighter. Had it lasted longer, I certainly would have experienced more within myself. And perhaps my heart would finally have opened, my tongue been set free. I would gladly have gone with him, too. It was not to be. I don't know how long I will stay here. It seems to me that I might remain here forever. I scarcely dare to admit it to myself, but faith stirs too deeply within me: someday I will find what constantly moves me; it is present. If I move around here with this faith, everything comes together in a higher image, a new order, and everything tends toward one region. Then everything becomes so familiar to me, so dear; and what appeared strange and foreign to me suddenly becomes like a household utensil.

Precisely this strangeness is strange to me, and so this collection has always repelled and attracted me at once. I cannot and may not understand the teacher. He is just so incomprehensibly dear to me. I know he understands me; he has never spoken against my feeling and my wish. He wants us rather to pursue our own way, because every new path goes through new lands, and each one finally leads to these dwellings, to this sacred home. Hence, I will inscribe my figure too, and if, according to the inscription, no mortal can lift the veil, we must seek to become immortal; whoever does not want to lift it is no genuine disciple of Saïs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> If some iconographers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century read the veil of Isis as an emblem of the inaccessibility of the deepest truths of nature – reserved, perhaps, for the Creator – others began to see the rise of modern mathematical natural science as a triumph of the human mind over the mysteries of the natural world. Novalis could be seen as a proponent of this view, under some description. In any event, interpreters of Novalis's 'magical idealism' cannot afford to ignore those passages in the corpus that express confidence in human reason and admiration for those who aspire to remove the veil from nature's countenance.

## II

## Nature

A long time must have passed before human beings thought to designate the manifold objects of their senses with a common name and to set [*zu setzen*] themselves in opposition to them. Through exercise, developments were furthered, and in all developments separations and divisions occur that can be readily compared to the splitting of a ray of light. It was only gradually that our inwardness split into such manifold forces, and with continued exercise this splitting will also increase. Perhaps it is only the sickly disposition of later human beings, that they lose the capacity to mix the scattered colors of their spirit once more, and to restore at will the old, simple, natural state or to effect new, manifold combinations of them. The more united they are, the more united, complete, and personal does every natural body, every appearance flow into them: for the nature of the senses corresponds to the nature of the impression, and hence to those earlier humans, everything seemed human, familiar, and companionable, the freshest originality must have been discernible in their views, each of their utterances was a true breath of nature, and their representations must have corresponded to the world around them and presented a faithful expression of it. We can therefore consider our forefathers<sup>7</sup> thoughts about the things of this world as a necessary product, as a self-portrait of the state of earthly nature at that time, and from these thoughts, as the most fitting instruments for the observation of the universe [*des Weltalls*], we can surely take away the chief relation of the same, the relation at that time of the universe to its *inhabitants* and its inhabitants to the universe. We find that precisely the noblest questions first occupied their attention and that they sought the key to this wonderful edifice sometimes in a principal mass of actual things, sometimes in the poetized object of an unknown sense. Noticeable here is the common presentiment of this key in the liquid, the vaporous, the

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<sup>7</sup> The compressed history of conceptions of the natural world that Novalis proceeds to offer suggests that by ‘our forefathers’ he means the ancient Greeks. To be sure, this sketch of a history of early Greek philosophy, along with other details from subsequent eras in European intellectual history, subverts the idea that the novel is set in ancient Egypt, as the title would lead one to think. As always, Novalis’s appeals to the past and his various histories are not meant to capture the way things actually were but to occasion reflection upon the future and the redemptive potential of the present.



formless.<sup>8</sup> The inertia and helplessness of solid bodies no doubt inspired the faith, not without significance, in their dependence and baseness. But soon enough, a pondering mind hit upon the difficulty of explaining form on the basis of formless forces and oceans.<sup>9</sup> He attempted to loosen the knot by a kind of unification, whereby he made the first beginnings fixed particles with definite shapes but small beyond all conception, and now out of this sea of dust, he thought he could complete the immense structure, but not without the help of cooperative creatures of thought, of forces of attraction and repulsion.<sup>10</sup> Earlier still, one finds not scientific explanations, but fairy tales and poems full of remarkable imagery, of human beings, gods, and animals as cooperative builders, and the most natural way in which the world emerges ceases to be described.<sup>11</sup> At the very least, one experiences the certainty of an accidental, *handicraft* origin of the world, and even for those who despise the unregulated products of the imagination, this representation is meaningful enough. To treat the history of the world as human history, to find only human happenings and relations everywhere, is a nomadic idea, conspicuous in novel form in the most distinct eras, and it seems to have held permanent rank for its marvelous effect and ease of conviction. The contingency of nature seems of itself to fit in with the idea of human personality, too, and is ultimately most willing to be understood as a human being. Hence the art of poetry has been the dearest instrument of authentic friends of nature, and the spirit of nature appears brightest in poems. When we read and hear genuine poems, we feel the movement of an inner understanding of nature and hover, like its heavenly embodiment, at once in it and above it. Natural scientists [*Naturforscher*] and poets have always shown themselves to be one people by way of one language. What the former gathered into a whole [*im Ganzen*] and arranged in great, ordered masses, the latter have worked into daily fare and need for human hearts and have split that immeasurable nature and formed it into manifold, small, agreeable natures. While the poets have pursued the liquid and fugitive with a light heart [*Sinn*], the natural scientists

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<sup>8</sup> This appears to be an allusion to Thales, Anaximenes, and Anaximander: the first made *water* the first principle (what Aristotle would call the ‘material cause’) of all things, the second *air*, the third what he called *to apeiron* (the unlimited or the formless).

<sup>9</sup> The “pondering mind” is almost certainly Democritus, who reduced the material world to a collection of atoms moving about in a void.

<sup>10</sup> The editors of the critical edition are surely right that Novalis has “mixed up Empedocles’s doctrine of hate and love [repulsion and attraction] as causes of movement and the mixing of elements with the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus” (HKA I, 595).

<sup>11</sup> The view that the period of the emerging philosophical *logos* (reason, discursive thought) was preceded by more ancient *muthoi* (stories, myths, poetic accounts) became a fixture in German scholarship during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Novalis’s way of figuring the past, the earlier poetic orientations have advantages over their scientific counterparts.

sought to explore the inner structure and relations among the members with sharp cuts of the knife.<sup>12</sup> Under their hands friendly nature died and left behind only dying, quivering remnants, while the poet animated her as with an inspiring wine until she uttered the most divine and sprightly notions and, raised above her everyday life, she soared to heaven, danced and prophesied, welcomed everyone, and squandered her treasures with a gay heart. And so she enjoyed heavenly hours with the poet, and only summoned the natural scientist when she was sick and burdened by her conscience. Then she answered each of his questions and treated the serious and strict man reverently. Whoever would know her mind rightly must therefore seek it in the society of poets, where she is open and pours out her wonderful heart. But whoever does not love her from the bottom of the heart, but admires and strives only to experience this or that in her, must visit her sickroom, her charnel house [*Beinhaus*].

Our relations to nature are as incomprehensibly various as our relations with human beings; and as she shows herself childlike to the child, and presses herself fondly to his childlike heart, so she shows herself to be divine to the god and attuned to his elevated spirit. One cannot say, without speaking exaggeratedly, that there is one nature; and all striving for truth in discourse and conversation about nature only removes us further from naturalness. A great deal is already gained when the striving to comprehend nature completely is ennobled to longing [*Sehnsucht*], to tender, unassuming longing that prefers to indulge the strange, cold creature, if only it can count on days to come of more familiar intercourse [*vertrauteren Umgang*]. There is a mysterious force [*Zug*] tending in all directions within us, spreading itself everywhere [*rings*] from a midpoint infinitely deep. If wondrous nature, sensible or insensible, surrounds us, we believe this force to be an attraction of nature, an externalization of our sympathy with her: but behind these blue, remote forms, one person still seeks a home that they conceal from him, a beloved of his youth, parents, siblings, old friends, lovely times past; another thinks that unknown glories await him out there, and he believes that a future full of life is hidden in it, and he longingly stretches out his hand toward a new world. A few remain calmly in this glorious environment and seek only to grasp it in its fullness and concatenation [*Verkettung*], not forgetting about the isolation of the shimmering thread that links the members in a row and forms the holy chandelier, and they find themselves blessed in the

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<sup>12</sup> The image of natural scientific inquiry as murder has a long history. In English romanticism it reaches something of a poetic head in Wordsworth's lines in "The Tables Turned": "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: — / We murder to dissect."

contemplation [*Beschauung*] of this living ornament hovering over the depths of night. Hence manifold contemplations of nature emerge, at one end the sensation of nature becomes a pleasurable notion, a banquet, at the other end it is transformed into the most devout religion, giving direction, bearing, and meaning to an entire life. Even among the childlike peoples, there were serious minds for whom nature was the face of the divine, while other gay hearts only prayed to her at table; to them the air was a refreshing drink, the stars were lights to dance under at night, plants and animals only tasty dishes, and so nature seemed to them not like a silent, wonderful temple, but like a jolly kitchen and pantry. In between, there were other, more ingenious [*sinniger*] souls who discerned in present-day nature only great but overgrown gardens and occupied themselves day and night in the creation of models of a nobler nature.<sup>13</sup> – They divided themselves up convivially for this great work, some sought to awaken the subsiding and lost tones in air and forests, others set down their presentiments and images of more beautiful races in bronze and stone, shaped more beautiful rocks into dwellings, brought back to light the treasures hidden in the crypts of the earth; tamed the unruly streams, populated the inhospitable sea, led glorious plants and animals to desert zones of old, dammed the forest floods and cultivated the nobler flowers and herbs, opened the earth to the touch of fructifying air and the kindling light, taught colors to mingle and order themselves into charming shapes, taught wood and meadow, springs and crags to unite again in pleasing gardens, breathed tones into loving things, that they might unfold and move in joyful rhythms, took under protection those poor, forsaken animals amenable to human ways, and cleansed the woods of savage monsters, the misbegotten creatures of a degenerate fantasy. Nature soon learned friendlier mores [*Sitten*] again, she became gentler and more refreshing, more willing to favor human wishes. Gradually her heart was stirred humanely again, her fantasies became brighter, she was affable again, and answered the friendly questioner gladly, and so the Golden Age seems to have returned, in which she was the human being's friend, consoler, priestess, and enchantress, as she dwelled among them, and a heavenly intercourse made humans immortal. Then the constellations will visit the earth again, which they once stared at angrily in days of darkness; then the sun will lay down its stern scepter, and become a star among stars again, and all the races of the world will unite again after long separation. Old orphaned

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<sup>13</sup> By those who create “models of a nobler nature” and embrace the project of “taming” the natural world, Hardenberg probably means to include early modern philosophers such as Descartes, as well as certain representatives of the European Enlightenment, including those dedicated to fine art. It is worth noting that the narrator views the task in a sympathetic light.

families will then find each other, and each day will see new greetings, new embraces; then the former inhabitants of the earth will return, on every hill embers will be rekindled, everywhere flames of life will blaze, old dwelling places will be newly built, old times renewed, and history will become the dream of an infinite, everlasting present.

Whoever is of this race and faith, and also wants to contribute something of his own to this taming [*Entwilderung*] of nature, frequents the workshops of the artists, eavesdrops on that poetry [*Dichtkunst*] that unexpectedly breaks forth everywhere, in all conditions, never tires of contemplating nature and conversing with her, pursues her hints everywhere and shuns no arduous course when she beckons, even if he must enter the musty tomb: he surely discovers ineffable treasures, his candle finally stands still, and who knows in what heavenly mysteries a charming subterranean native may initiate him. Certainly, no one strays further from the goal than he who imagines that he already knows the strange realm and can fathom its composition in a few words and everywhere find the right path. No one who tears himself loose and makes himself an island gains understanding without toil. Only children or childlike humans, who know not what they do, can experience this. Long and steady intercourse, free and artistic contemplation, attentiveness to subtle hints and traits, an inward poetic life, seasoned senses, a simple and god-fearing heart – these are the essential requirements of a genuine friend of nature, without which none of his wishes will blossom. It does not seem wise to want to understand and comprehend a human world without full, flowering humanity. No sense must slumber, and even if they are not all equally awake, still they must all be animated and not suppressed or fatigued. Just as one beholds the future painter in the boy who crowds every wall and all the smooth sand with drawings [*Zeichnungen*], and combines bright colors into figures, so one sees a future philosopher in the one who pursues and investigates all natural things without rest, attends to everything, collects whatever is noteworthy, and is joyful if he becomes master and possessor of a new appearance, a new force and cognition.

Now to some it seems not worth the slightest effort to pursue the endless divisions of nature and, furthermore, a dangerous undertaking, with no end [*Ausgang*] or fruit.<sup>14</sup> We will never find the smallest grain of a solid body, never the simplest thread, because all magnitude loses itself forward and backward in the infinite, and this also holds for the species of bodies and

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<sup>14</sup> The way of thinking on display in this paragraph is probably modeled on Pascal, but the available evidence of Novalis's interest in Pascal is slim. There is only one reference to the *Pensées* in the critical edition, which occurs in a calendar entry on 14 January 1797 (HKA IV, 27).

forces; here, too, one turns up new species, new combinations, new appearances, and so on into the infinite. They seem to stand still only when our diligence is spent, and so one squanders precious time in futile contemplations and tedious enumeration, and this finally becomes true madness, a permanent dizziness facing the terrible abyss. And no matter how far we advance, nature always remains a terrifying mill of death: everywhere dreadful reversals, indissoluble eddying chain, a voracious kingdom of wildest presumption and measureless malevolence; the few bright spots illumine only a night all the more horrible, and terrors of all kinds frighten the spectator into insensibility. Death stands like a savior by the side of the unfortunate human race, for without death the most insane would be the happiest. Precisely this striving to fathom this immense mechanism [*Triebwerk*] is already a march toward the abyss, an incipient vertigo: for every stimulus seems an expanding vortex that soon assumes total control over the unfortunate and carries him away through a terror-filled night. Here is the cunning pitfall of the human understanding, which nature seeks everywhere to destroy as its greatest enemy. Blessed is the childlike ignorance and innocence of human beings, which keeps them from perceiving the dreadful dangers that surround their peaceful dwellings on all sides, like terrible storm clouds that threaten to break out over them at every moment. Only the inner disunity of nature's forces has preserved humans so far, but that great time cannot fail to arrive when all human beings will, by a great, common resolve, tear themselves away from this painful situation, from this terrible prison, and, through the voluntary renunciation of their worldly [*hiesigen*] possessions, rescue their race from this misery once and for all and escape to a happier world, to their ancient father. Hence, they would end in a manner worthy of them, and arrive at their necessary, violent destruction, or still more terrible degeneration into beasts, through the gradual destruction of their organs of thought, through insanity. Intercourse with natural forces, with animals, plants, rocks, storms and waves must necessarily make human beings resemble these objects, and this resembling, transformation, and dissolution of the divine and human into unbridled forces is the spirit of nature, this terrible, devouring power: and is not everything that one sees already a rape of heaven, a great ruin of bygone glories, the remains of a terrible feast?

“Very well,” say the more courageous, “let our race conduct a slow, well-conceived war of annihilation against this nature. We must seek to get the better of her with insidious poisons. The natural scientist [*Naturforscher*] is a noble hero who plunges into the open abyss in order to save his fellow citizens. Artists have already dealt her many covert blows, continue down this

road, take possession of the secret threads, and make her lust after herself. Use this strife so that you can bend her to your will, like the fire-spitting bull. She will come to obey you. Patience and faith befit the children of mankind. Distant brothers are united with us for one end, the wheel of stars will become the spinning wheel of our lives, and then, with the help of our slaves, we will be able to build ourselves a new Djinnistan.<sup>15</sup> With inward triumph, let us behold her devastations, her tumults, she shall sell herself to us, and pay a heavy fine for every violent deed. Let us live and die with an enthusiastic feeling of our freedom, here the stream surges that will someday submerge and tame her and let us bathe ourselves in it and refresh ourselves with renewed courage for heroic deeds. The monster's rage does not reach this far, a drop of freedom is enough to lame it once and for all and to set its devastation a limit and an end."

Several others agree: the talisman lies here or nowhere. We sit at the source of freedom and watch; it is the great magic mirror in which the entire creation reveals itself purely and clearly, in it the tender spirits and reflections of all natures bathe, and here every chamber is receptive to us. Why do we need to journey tiresomely through the dismal world of visible things? The purer world lies indeed within us, in this source. Here the true sense of the great, multicolored, confused spectacle reveals itself; and if we step into nature full of such vistas, everything is familiar to us, and we surely recognize every shape. We don't first need protracted investigation; an easy comparison, just a few lines in the sand, are enough for us to understand. Hence everything is a great script [*Schrift*] to which we hold the key, and nothing comes to us unexpectedly, since we know the course of the great clockwork in advance. We alone enjoy nature with our full senses, because she does not destroy them, and we are not frightened by feverish dreams, but bright reflection makes us confident and calm.

"The others are mistaken," replies a serious man.<sup>16</sup> "Don't they recognize in nature the faithful copy [*Abdruck*] of themselves? They devour

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<sup>15</sup> Or the land of the jinns (spirits), often Anglicized as genies. The origins of belief in jinns are obscure, but they play a role in Arab belief during pre-Islamic times and occur somewhat frequently in the Qur'an. The term occurs on more than one occasion according to the critical edition. In a poem probably written in 1789 to his friend Conradi, for instance, Novalis writes: "You fly away to Djinnistan/To the land of genies and other, smaller spirits/Where Wieland is king" (HKA IV, 69). In this context, Djinnistan stands for Weimer, where the German poet and Enlightenment author Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) resided. Wieland published a series of tales called *Dschinnistan oder auserlesene Feen- und Geister-Mährchen* between 1786 and 1789. According to the editors of the critical edition, Novalis employed the term "as a synonym for Eden or Paradise" (HKA I, 595).

<sup>16</sup> To judge by the vision and the language on display in this paragraph, the "serious man" is probably Fichte, although the editors of the critical edition maintain that "this is N[ovalis]

themselves in wild thoughtlessness. They do not know that their nature is a play of thought, a desolate fantasy of their dreams. Indeed, to them nature is a terrible beast, a strange, hazardous mask of their own desires. The one who is awake sees this brood of his unregulated imagination without shuddering, for he knows that they are hollow specters of his own weakness. He feels himself lord of the world, his I hovers [*schwebt*] powerfully above this abyss and will for all eternity hover in exaltation over this endless succession. His inwardness strives to announce and spread harmony. As he advances into the infinite, he becomes more at one with himself and his surrounding creation, and with every step he beholds the eternal, all-embracing efficacy of a high, moral order of the world, the citadel of his I, emerge evermore brightly. Reason is the meaning of the world: it is there for the sake of reason, and if the world is initially the battleground of a childish, developing reason, it will someday come to be the divine image of its activity, the theater of a true church. Until then, let the human being honor the world as the symbol [*Sinnbild*] of his mind, both of which are ennobled together in indeterminable stages. Therefore, whoever will take cognizance of nature should exercise his moral sense, act and shape in accordance with the noble core of his inwardness, and nature will open itself to him of her own accord. Moral action is the great and singular experiment in which all the puzzles of the most manifold appearances are solved. Whoever understands this and knows how to pursue it in rigorous trains of thought is an eternal master of nature.”

The disciple hears the crossing voices with alarm. Each seems to him in the right and a peculiar confusion overcomes his mind. Gradually the inner turmoil subsides, and a spirit of peace seems to hover over the dark, crashing waves, the arrival of which announces itself through renewed courage and contemplative cheerfulness in the soul of the youth.

A sprightly playmate sporting roses and ivy on his brow came leaping in and saw the disciple sitting sunk into himself. “Brooder,” he shouted, “you are on the wrong path. Hence you will make no great progress. The best thing is always mood. Is that truly a mood of nature? You are still young. And do you not feel the commandment of youth throughout your veins? Do not love and longing fill your breast? How can you just sit in solitude? Does nature sit alone? The solitary one flees joy and yearning: and without yearning, what is the use of nature to you? The spirit is at home only among human beings, invades all of your senses with a thousand bright colors, and embraces you like an invisible beloved. At our festivals its tongue is unleashed, it sits on

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himself, not Fichte” (HKA I, 595). They cite Mähl, who argues that the passage contains “the only decisive rejection of Fichte that N[ovals] has handed down to us.”

NOVALIS

high and strikes up songs of gayest life. You have still not loved, poor child; at the first kiss a new world will open itself to you, and life will run through your enchanted heart in a thousand streams.”